The IDLER

Public Occurrences, Comment, Excursions & Rational Entertainment

Nr 32 JUNE 1967 25c THE COPY

The Foul-up Factor

WISHING IT NEVER LEFT

In Which the Hazards of Locomotive and Communicative Progress are Discussed; What to Do About It; Lewis Smith Proposes a New Way to Look at the Problems of the Civil Rights Movement; and Charles McDowell Jr. Tries to Get a Power Motor Started As Well As Several Other Diversions.

Surrounded as we are by sonic booms, yield signs, zip codes, launch pads, living color and mock-ups of supersonic transports that will stretch our imaginations and our national budget, it is a callous individual indeed who is unmoved by man's ability to carry himself and his message wherever he desires.

Yet despite the locomotive and communicative achievements of this century, there remains ample cause for ambivalence as we view the wonders with which we have been blessed. Consider, for example, the following items:

--It is said that if all the car owners in Los Angeles were to move their vehicles onto the streets of the city at the same time, there would be no place for them to go; the roads would be completely filled with automobiles.

--Mail in this country often takes longer to reach its destination than it would have in the days of the pony express. (One letter recently sent me took eight days to travel twelve blocks--or a block and a half a day.)

--One frequently finds in telephoning long distance that the call can not be completed. Not because the line is busy at the other end, but because all the circuits into the city called are tied up.

--An article in Traffic Quarterly in 1962 reported that "on urban commuter expressways, peak-hour traffic congestion rises to meet maximum capacity." The article is obviously out of date; today peak-hour congestion surpasses maximum capacity.

--An Administration spokesman says that if the railroads go on strike, six million persons will be thrown out of work.

--A lady who rides the Pennsylvania Railroad's "Patriot" between Philadelphia and Washington each week was quoted in a local paper as saying that that the train had never been less than twenty minutes late and is often considerably more tardy. (The Administration has not informed us how many persons are late to work because of the "Patriot.")

--It is reputedly more dangerous to drive your car than to fight in the Vietnam war.

--One mistake in Canada a couple of years ago blacked out much of the northeastern United States, throwing transportation and communications systems into a state of chaos. Similar trouble last month had the same effect upon several Middle Atlantic states.

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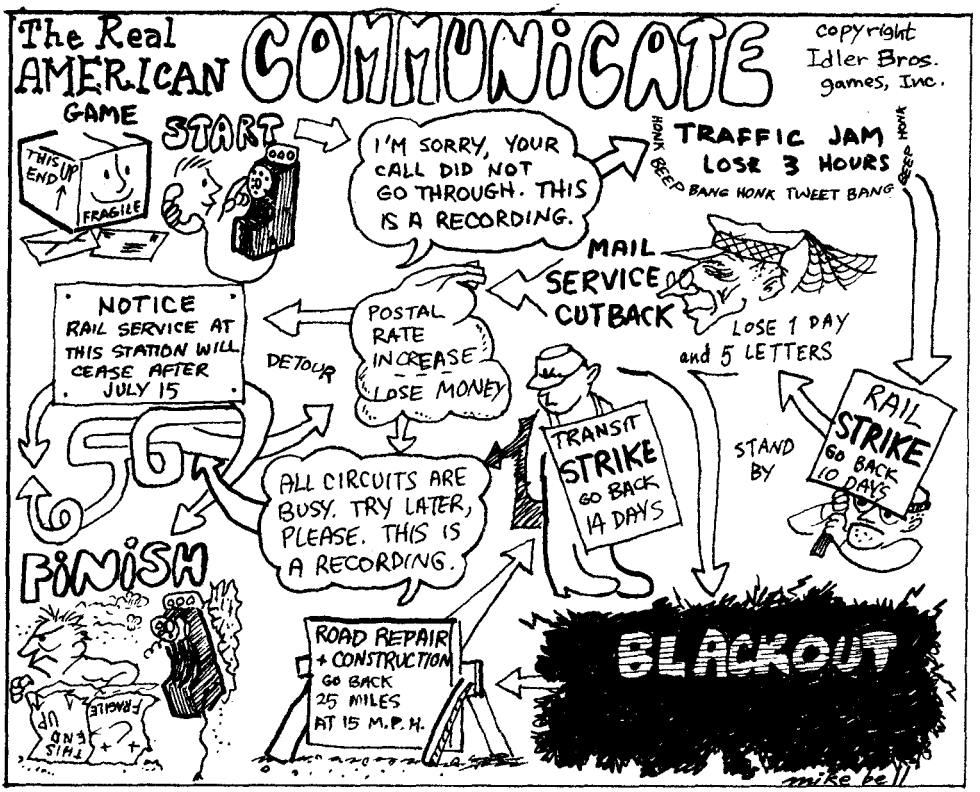
The Real AMERICAN COMMUNICATE GAME
copyright Idler Bros. games, Inc.
START
THIS UP END
FRAGILE
I'M SORRY, YOUR CALL DID NOT GO THROUGH. THIS IS A RECORDING.
HONK BEEP
TRAFFIC JAM LOSE 3 HOURS
BANG HONK TWEET BANG
MAIL SERVICE CUTBACK
LOSE 1 DAY and 5 LETTERS
NOTICE RAIL SERVICE AT THIS STATION WILL CEASE AFTER JULY 15
DETOUR
POSTAL RATE INCREASE LOSE MONEY
TRANSIT STRIKE GO BACK 14 DAYS
STAND BY
RAIL STRIKE GO BACK 10 DAYS
ALL CIRCUITS ARE BUSY. TRY LATER, PLEASE. THIS IS A RECORDING.
FINISH
ROAD REPAIR + CONSTRUCTION GO BACK 25 MILES AT 15 M.P.H.
BLACKOUT
mike bell

Railroad passenger runs are being abandoned throughout the country. This leaves travellers a fair weather choice between flying, going by bus or driving. In snow or fog, however, it leaves them little alternative other than misery.

Other examples are legion. They point, in aggregate, to a phenomenon that has been overlooked by the social, electronic and mechanical engineers of our nation. This phenomenon may be designated the Foul-up Factor. Simply stated it amounts to this:

As the speed and efficiency with which matter is transported or communicated is increased, there is a geometric progression in the probability that the matter being being transported or communicated will not arrive at its destination at all, or will arrive late, or will arrive in such a condition that it (or its sender or receiver) will wish that it had never left in the first place.

Train passengers, persons who ship fragile items through the mails, and drivers traversing the Pennsylvania Turnpike in January are particularly vulnerable to the effects of the Foul-up Factor, but it touches all our lives, adding untold frustration and despair to the human experience.

For several reasons, however, we are not as conscious of the Foul-up Factor as we might be. First, since more particles of matter are being transported than ever before, there is an absolute increase in the number which reach their destination safely and on time. This situation tends to obscure

(Please turn to page 7)

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Civil Rights and Vicious Circles

BY LEWIS SMITH

One of the astounding political events of recent years has been the rapid disintegration of the civil rights movement, with almost every leader seeming to jump on his horse and ride off in a different direction, and some of them in several directions at once.

Not being entirely satisfied with published explanations of all this sad confusion, I endeavored to find one of my own. While not sure I have really done any better than anyone else in this regard, I did come up with something (modestly baptized "the Smith vicious circle analysis") which may prove useful in deciding where the civil rights movement should go from here.

Vicious circle analysis (see chart next page) is a device for analyzing the problems suffered by Americans of African descent. (This is normally called "the Negro problem" or "the race problem." Since, however, whites generally cause Negroes far more problems than Negroes cause whites, it might be more appropriate to refer tc this matter as "the white problem.")

Vicious circle analysis attempts to look at all these problems simultaneously. It tires to see them in their mutual relationships, many problems being at once the result of others and the cause of still others. It conceives of these problems as constituting a series of overlapping vicious circles which, once set in motion by history, tend to keep moving of their own momentum. Any individual caught up in one or more of these vicious circles will have a hard time breaking out.

Vicious circle analysis also attempts to distinguish between those problems which actually form the vicious circles and those which are "exogenous," outside the system acting as causes but not being the result of the "endogenous" or inside problems. The exogenous factors act as boosters which help to keep the circular motion from running down. Finally, vicious circle analysis facilitates identification of bottleneck problems and the establishment of priorities between different civil rights objectives.

A little clarification of the chart is now in order. Given a low income and the high cost of housing, an individual can only afford poor housing. In fact, in many cities the poor pay more per square foot and get lower quality. Given the fact that people earn different incomes and therefore can afford different kinds of housing; given prejudice; and given an individual who can only afford poor housing, then the housing where he lives will be segregated in some way if not several. Prejudice plus segregated housing tends to produce segregated schools. Poor housing and segregated housing conspire to produce neighborhoods where teachers are reluctant to work (both white and Negro) and which good teachers manage to avoid better than bad teachers. Poor teachers plus segregated schools make for poor schools, for even if the school is not segregated racially, it will be in the sense that nearly all the students will be suffering from the same psychological and mental disabilities and will not be able to stimulate each other.

Poor home environment, the joint product of several things, completes the causes of poor preparation for manhood. Poor preparation plus prejudice force an individual to take crumby jobs which pay low wages.

Just from looking at the chart

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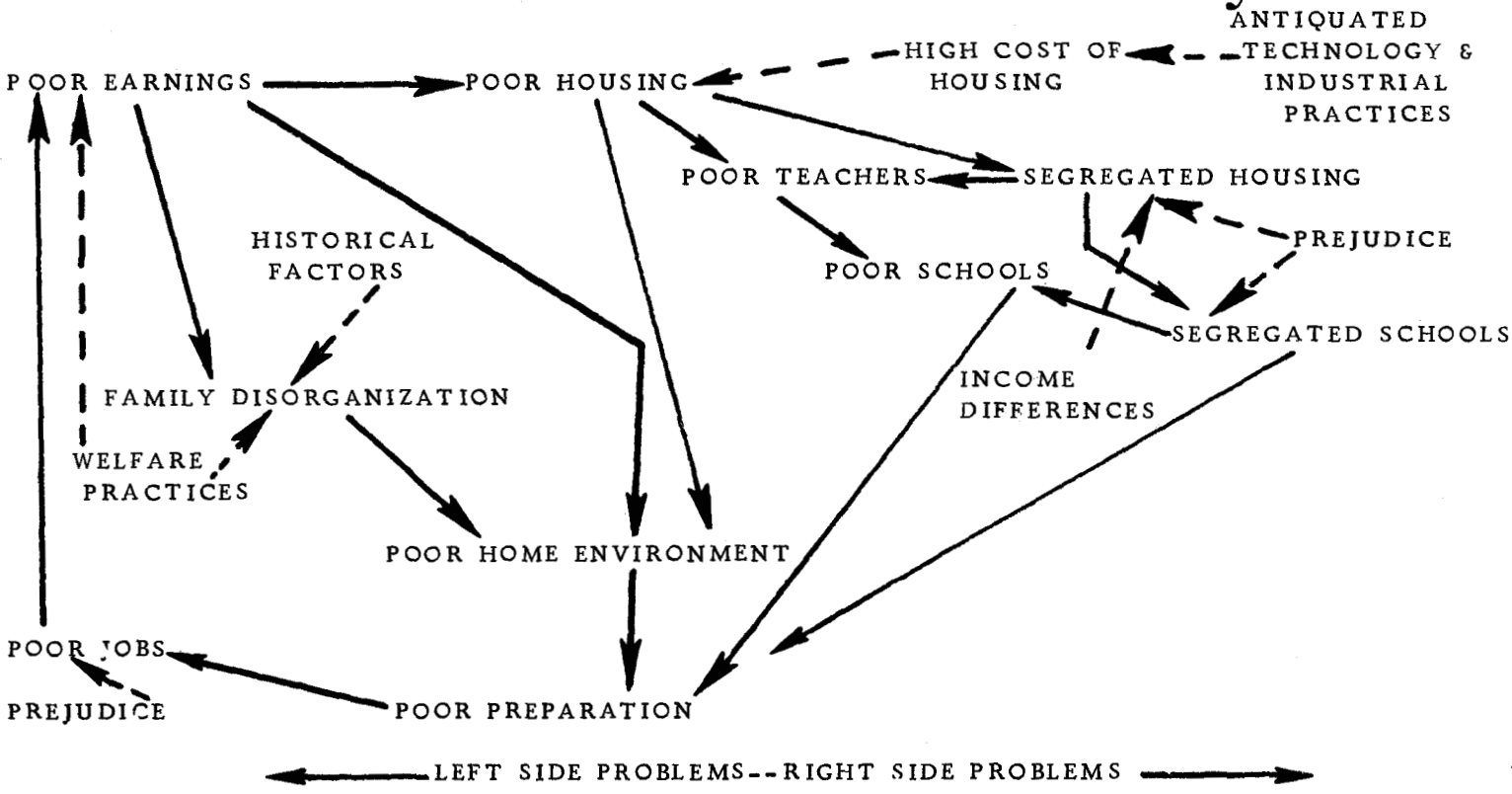
The Smith Vicious Circle Analysis



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there become apparent some of the reasons why the civil rights movement is in such disarray. First of all, those working on a particular problem are tempted to move backwards around a circle in a vain search for a problem which is "more fundamental. " Secondly, there is at first glance no best place to start. One place is about as good as another, and each leader concentrates on what appeals to him, feeling that he is fully justified and that the others are mistaken. Another reason for discord is failure to analyze the relationships between the problems faced by Negroes. Emotion and morality are not enough when faced with something as complex and circular as described on the chart.

A look at the chart shows immediately that certain problems are of a bottleneck nature. If the system of problems may be conceived as having some similarity to a hydraulic system, then substantially solving the problems of preparation, jobs or earnings would greatly diminish the flow in all the vicious circles. On the other hand, elimination of segregation in housing and education would still leave most of the vicious circles operating.

Of the bottleneck problems, poor earnings is the easiest to tackle politically and administratively. Moreover, its solution does not depend so closely on the solution of its current cause--poor jobs--as the solution, say, of poor jobs depends upon the solution of poor preparation. On top of this, poor earnings is affected by the most tractable of all the exogenous problems: welfare practices. Finally, solution of poor earnings would alleviate three other problems. Only solution of poor housing would contribute as much in this sense. These reasons suggest that a family allowance, negative income tax or some such thing should become the top priority of the civil rights movement.

While no attempt has been made to measure the volume of flow through the different circles, the Coleman Report (of the Office of Education) implies that is is somewhat greater through poor home environment than through either poor schools or segregated schools. Therefore, the second priority objectives should be aimed at solving problems which contribute to the left side vicious circles passing through poor home environment. Although poor jobs and poor preparation are bottleneck problems, they are not such good candidates because of their partial dependence on poor schools. Family disorganization is difficult to tackle directly. Moreover, it should be greatly relieved by higher incomes and the changes in welfare practices which can and should be brought about when a guaranteed minimum income or such like is established.

This leaves us with poor housing. It has an advantage noted previously. Alsc its solution will facilitate attack on the right side vicious circles, which all depend on it. Finally, its solution depends not only on higher incomes but on lowering the cost of housing. We must find a cheaper way to rebuild housing. (In any case, it is cheaper than building new). We must find the man who will do for the apartment what Henry Ford did for the automobile. This should be the second priority of the civil rights movement.

Third priority should be to end job discrimination and expand special schools and training activities for those whose lack of skills or knowledge is holding them back and who cannot meet their needs in traditional academic institutions.

As progress is made in solving the

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left side problems, emphasis should be shifted to a massive attack on housing segregation until this has number one priority. It should be kept in mind that the more Negroes with incomes to buy into middle income neighborhoods, the easier it will be to break down residential segregation. In the final analysis some one family has to move into a neighborhood and risk garbage on the lawn, shotgun blasts, etc. Not everyone who can afford it, is therefore willing to do so. Moreover, not all Negroes want to live in white neighborhoods and this, of course, is their privilege. What we are fighting for, after all, is the right of a Negro to move where he wants to, just like anyone else, if he wants to move. We are not fighting for the even dispersal of all minority groups throughout the breadth of this land.

The reader should clearly understand that all these problems must be solved. The purpose of this analysis is merely to help establish the order in which they are to be solved and the relative allocation of civil rights resources to different problems in a given period of time.

The reader should also note from the chart that while prejudice got these vicious circles going and acts as a booster pump at several places in the system, it basically does not perpetuate the vicious circles. If prejudice were to disappear tomorrow, the Negro's problems would continue for a long time to come. Basically what keeps these vicious circles in perpetual motion is the fact that the very relationship between most of the problems is circular.

The above might be used as an argument for a simultaneous attack on all the problems at once. For such an attack, however, to be efficient and effective, we would have to measure the volume of flow through each problem and make the attack on each problem proportionate to the flow at that point. This would require more coordination and more resources than the civil rights movement is capable of providing.

LETTERS

FOOLISH TO DEBATE

It would be foolish to attempt to debate Viet Nam at all, much less by mail. I am not certain that I am right. But I am certain that you are wrong. Please save yourself some effort and me some choler by omitting my name from any future mailing of your unreasonable magazine.

K. D.
Merritt Island, Fla.

THE SAP IS RUNNING

In the past few months I had my doubts that the Idler would survive. It seemed to waste away as if dying of malnutrition. The April issue showed strong signs of renewal--the sap is running again, eh?

J. T.
San Jose, Calif.

(The Idler welcomes correspondence from its readers. Please indicate that your letter is intended for publication.)

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(FOUL-UP FACTOR CONT'D)

the growing gap between the design specifications of our transportation and communications systems and the actual performance data we may derive from them. As we drive bumper to bumper on an expressway and come upon a gruesome accident by the side of the road, we can reassure ourselves by merely looking at the mass of operative vehicles ahead of us and in our rear-view mirror.

Another reason we ignore the Foul-up Factor is the nature of the transportation and communications industry's advertising. There is no hint in airlines ads that planes occasionally crash, are often late, and don't fly at all in bad weather. The TV commercials for automobiles emphasize horsepower without ever telling us that such horsepower is totally ineffective in the midst of a twenty mile jam on the Baltimore-Washington expressway or while trying to find a nonexistent parking place downtown.

Our lack of awareness of the Foul-up Factor leaves us unprepared for failure. For the man riding the overland stage or sending a letter by sailing ship from Europe to America, there was a close relationship between what the machine he utilized was meant to do and what it actually did. The stage might well be set upon by bandits or the letter-writer might have his correspondence delayed by storms in the Atlantic, but our rider and our writer were fully aware of these possibilities and prepared for them both psychologically and physically.

Today's man, on the other hand, who flies the friendly skies of United, or leaves the driving to Greyhound or blithely slaps a special delivery stamp on an important piece of mail has generally made no provision for the very real possibility that the system upon which he relies will suddenly fail him.

A skeptical reader may sense here a plea against progress. This is not the case. What is sought is truth in the packaging of progress and provision for those increasingly frequent occasions when progress runs amuck. We must include the Foul-up Factor in our future planning.

This might be done in a variety of ways. Airlines and railroads could provide each passenger one free drink for every fifteen minutes they were late. Thus the later one became the less one would care.

Automobiles could be equipped with a special low gear, such as is installed in hearses, for congested freeway driving. For secular driving a small plastic statue of Ralph Nader could be made available at slight additional cost.

Power companies could be required to provide elevators with restrooms and emergency food supplies in areas subject to frequent blackouts.

And the Federal Trade Commission could force advertisers to depict accurately the risks involved in using a particular transportation or communications system. I imagine this to involve the sort of statement used by the weather bureau when predicting rain:

The Idler

Published 11 months a year in Washington, D. C., for the edification, information, and entertainment of its readers. Twenty-five Cents the copy. Three Dollars a year (Four Dollars abroad).

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"Fly Ozone Airways to Oregon on our morning breakfast flight from Chicago to Portland. There is a 60% chance that it will take only three hours and forty-five minutes. In the event of excessive delays we will serve brunch during which our co-pilot will accompany your meal with a zither concert and one of our charming stewardesses will give a delightful impersonation of Capt. Eddie Rickenbacker."

Speed limit signs on highways could be automatically changed to reflect the actual speed of the traffic. There is little more frustrating than doing forty in a sixty mile per hour zone. But no one would mind doing forty in a thirty mile zone.

No doubt a research combine, supported by a federal grant, or a national commission could formulate numerous other ideas that would close the distance between our expectations and our realizations. Where the gap can not be eliminated, the planners could compensate for the Foul-up Factor by developing fail-safe devices such as mentioned above.

One need only imagine the Post Office urging us to use zipcodes in order to guarantee one week delivery between Brooklyn and the Bronx to realize what a new world this would be.

As we sat in the mobile bar and lodge dropped by helicopter alongside our stalled car on the Connecticut Turnpike, we would sip a gin and tonic provided gratis by the National Association of Concrete Manufacturers and reflect contentedly that half getting there was the fun.

The McDowell Papers

By Charles McDowell, Jr.

The following instructions on "How to Tune Up the Power Mower" are not taken from some government pamphlet or some interview with a theorist at the Department of Agriculture. This material is drawn from recent personal experience, and it is designed for the guidance of those who are willing to face life as it really is.

Any mechanical precision instrument requires careful preparation for a new season of use. Since a power mower is not a precision instrument but a mechanical instrument of oppression put on earth to punish mankind for his sins, the first step is to prepare yourself to face the power mower.

Pour a cup of coffee and take it outside into the Spring sunshine. Sit down somewhere and think. Think how a power mower is a dumb thing, hardly worthy of an intelligent being's hostility. Think how Dr. Norman Vincent Peale would approach a power mower. When the mind boggles at that, think of an aerator; compared with an aerator, a power mower is almost lovable.

Go into the utility room or the garage or wherever you keep it and confront the power mower. Note that it is behind the two tires that were removed from the rear wheels of the automobile to make way for the snowtires. Here is a good chance to take the tires to the service station for remounting, shifting the whole thrust of the day.

Assuming that you stick with the power mower--and we mean no reflection on your imagination--remove the power mower to the back yard. Walk around it looking at it. Procure

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tools and oil. How about another cup of coffee?

Check the gasoline can. Drive the gasoline can to the service station for filling. Why not take the tires? Discuss the tires with the service station man, who will remount them but will take no responsibility for your getting home on those two slicks.

Postpone the purchase of two tires, leave the old ones at the service station pending a decision, drive home with the can of gas. Take the top off the tank on the power mower and peer inside. Note that there is gas in the tank, and there is much sediment of some sort.

Sit down again and take as long as necessary to get straight with your conscience about not draining the tank and putting the power mower in good shape at the end of last season. Rationalize like the devil.

Drain the tank, blow into it (no smoking), fill it with clean gasoline. Now, just to see where you stand, try to start the mower. Note how many neighbors are watching you not starting it.

Detach the gas line after finding the right wrench, which is not with the other tools but in the sewing machine drawer. Blow out the gas line, reattach it, try once more to start the machine.

Remove the air filter. (Don't lose that long screw; there isn't another in the 27 nearest hardware stores. Don't you remember anything from last year?

Now you have a view of the general carburetion area of the internal combustion engine. Note the accelerator rod. Note the choke rod. Which is which? Note two springs, one of which is hanging loose at one end. Consider three or four likely looking holes in which to insert the terminal hook. Try one.

Now try to start the mower. It just might start on the eleventh try. Note that even at the lowest accelerator setting the engine roars like a jet. Note next that the roar becomes a feeble flutter, then a mighty roar, then a flutter, then stops entirely.

Hook the rod, whichever it is, into another hole. Adjust a screw that just might control air intake. Adjust another valve of unknown function. Start the mower again--one mighty, shattering roar, then silence. Curse a little.

Put the power mower into the back of the car, being very careful about lifting it in your weakened condition, and drive it to the service station, which also fixes power mowers. When you are told that there are 205 mowers ahead of yours, go on and buy the two new tires and go to the head of the line. The mechanic will get to it first thing Monday.

Drive home. Walk over to the home of a neighbor who is cutting his lawn and tell him he is cutting it (1) too low to shade out weeds, or (2) too high to encourage root development. Check his fertilizer--too much phosphorus. Dig a heel into his soil--impacted, needs an aerator.

If you aren't mechanical, you still can be horticultural.

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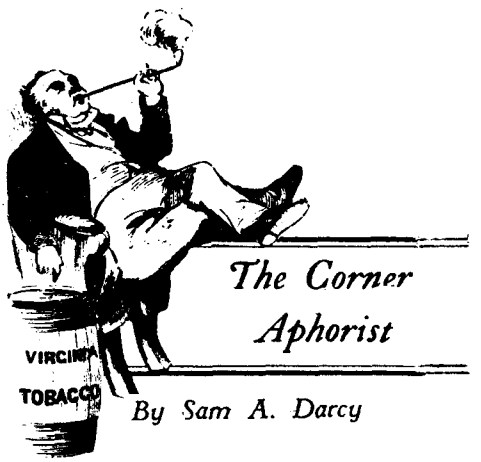

The Corner Aphorist

By Sam A. Darcy

➤A rumor, unconfirmed in the highest circles of the CIA, has it that Svetlana's memoirs will be called "Bringing Down Father." She is to get two and one-half million dollars for the job. This is several times as much as Shakespeare or Hemingway or Charles Dickens earned in their entire lifetimes. It is three times as much as Eisenhower got for his memoirs. Either this lady writes exquisite syntax or someone with a lot of money thinks that Krushchev did not succeed in beating Stalin's corpse to death. It will be interesting to see how Svetlana makes out.

➤If our militaristic messiahs aren't making noteworthy progress in taking over Vietnam, they are doing very well in taking over the United States. Still, the outpouring of several hundred thousand people in a demonstration for peace in New York City was an inspiring spectacle not only for an end to the Vietnam war, but as a practice of democracy in our own country. If encourages the hope that our militaristic messiahs may not have it all their own way.

It was spoiled by Secretary Rusk's statement on TV that he and the Johnson Administration would "pay no attention" to the pleas of those demonstrators. That's the language of absolute monarchs who had cause to regret such remarks. Our Constitution makes it the duty of government officials to pay attention to public petition.

SVETLANA & FATHER

➤Louis Ginsberg, poet and professor, sends us this:

SNAPSHOT OF AN OLD REACTIONARY

An obsolete maxim,
Faded and blurred,
He hobbles along,
Still uninterred.

Tight-lipped at changes,
Day and night,
He's wrong in being
Always right.

To animate death,
He seems to strive--
Only by accident
Is he alive!

Back Issues

September 1964--Summer 1965 (Dec. '64 & Jan. '65 out of print) $2.00. September 1965--Summer 1966 (June '66 out of print) $2.00. September 1966--Present $1.00. Send check to Idler, 413 6th NE, Washington, D. C.

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HUGH HAYNIE ...

"And to You—the Class of 1967—a Whole New World Awaits as You Pass These Portals of Academe"

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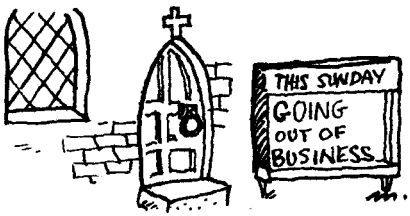

➤For a moment we thought that Lyndon Johnson had decided to abdicate. The New York Times carried a story which read:

"The Consolidated God Company .... could no longer operate profitably and closed down."

But it was only a gold mining operation in the Yukon.

➤A member of Ben Gurion's entourage on his recent visit here says he heard a fellow say: "The cup of Israel's troubles is overflowing but it's not full yet."

➤We were the fortunate recipient of several invitations to college commencement exercises. Most were inspiring with a quiet and justified sense of pride. The best commencement address we heard was at Russell Sage, Troy, N. Y., where Aline Saarinen talked brilliantly about style in life. The worst was Governor Shafer's speech at the University of Pennsylvania. He acknowledged that our constitution allows dissent. But that there is "destructive dissent," which opposes Johnson's war policies, and this we must not tolerate. "Responsible dissent" supports Mr. Johnson!

How's that, Mr. Webster?

➤Professor Brayne of Bryn Mawr defines an American who keeps boasting about or special-pleading for, the country of his ancestors as only half-ass-imilated.

➤Someone should write a history of the fight of former colonies for independence. It could be called From Mau Mau to Mao.

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FIRST CLASS MAIL

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